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Julia L. Frengs. Corporeal Archipelagos: Writing the Body in Francophone Oceanian Women's Literature. Lexington Books, 2017.

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Abstract

Review of Julia L. Frengs. *Corporeal Archipelagos. Writing the Body in Francophone Oceanian Women's Literature*. Lexington Books, 2017. ix + 236 pp.

Keywords

Book Review, Julia L Frengs, Corporeal Archipelagos: Writing the Body in Francophone Oceanian Women's Literature

Julia L. Frengs. *Corporeal Archipelagos: Writing the Body in Francophone Oceanian Women's Literature*. Lexington Books, 2017. ix + 236 pp.

Originating from her doctoral thesis and appearing, in sections, in other publications, Julia Frengs's first monograph goes beyond being just a sum of its respective parts; it is an impressively extensive study of Francophone women's writing from French Polynesia and New Caledonia, a region that has not received enough attention in academic studies. The title of this critical work evokes a spontaneous trajectory of signification. It elicits an image of the intimate and important relationship between French Polynesian women's bodies and the (is)land itself, and it points to a relationship that is plural in origin, emanating from trauma, violence, and forceful possession. Frengs masterfully analyzes the metaphoric and metonymic connection between the centrality of the female body and the land in this timely and scholarly manuscript. Using a strong theoretical framework and comparative approach, she explores responses to the way the female body functions as a trope in the works of four prolific contemporary Oceanian women writers of French expression: Déwé Gorodé, Claudine Jaques, Chantal Spitz, and Ari'irau.

The book begins with a contextualizing chapter, *The Instigation and Perpetuation of the Mythical Oceanian Body*, that explores the representation of the Oceanian body in French literature throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. Frengs skillfully leads the reader through various French male-authored texts to unveil and expose the mythicized, idyllic image of French Polynesia and New Caledonia that existed in the Western imaginary. Through this analysis, Frengs demonstrates the parallels between the fetishizing of Oceanian land and the objectification of the female body. As the author herself mentions, this chapter is important to situate the following analysis within a larger framework. Furthermore, this contextualizing section serves as a reminder that the following chapters have the important purpose of shedding light on Oceanian women writing their own bodies and their own history.

Despite the explicitly narrow geographical context of the analysis, the value of Frengs's book extends beyond the study of Francophone Literature of Polynesian origin to include noteworthy frameworks of feminist scholarship and readings through postcolonial, ecocritical, and philosophical lenses. Her thorough analysis of trauma, rape, violence, and silenced bodies of predominantly female literary characters culminates with an important question: based on the relationship between the body and writing, can one consider these texts as a cixousian example of *écriture féminine*?

Rather than treat each author individually, the following chapters proceed by themes; Frengs explores different textual representations of Oceanian female (and, in some instances, male) bodies as they appear in each text. Chapter 2, entitled "Sexual Violence, Trauma, and the Damaged Oceanian Body" explores the

representation of rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence and traces parallels between colonial abuse of the islanders and domestic abuse. Frengs examines each author's narratives of rape as figurative representation and portrayal of colonial power and history. As she demonstrates with ample examples of narratives of abuse, "sexual violence, almost always reveals more about power dynamics surrounding sex in French Polynesian society than it does about sex itself" (85). The trope of the "damaged body" reveals to be central in all of the studied texts and representative of an undeniable rapport of power and complicated gender relations. Frengs concludes that the narratives of the damaged Oceanian body are rather a political commentary of women writers and a testimony of the political climate of their respective countries.

The intimate link between the Oceanian female body and the land is further explored in chapter 3, "Ecological Bodies: An Ecocritical Lens." It surveys the relationship between the exploitation and abuse of the land and the body. Frengs highlights examples of abuse of the motherland in the narratives of different genres and provides us with an extensive understanding of the undeniable tie between the land and the women's bodies. For instance, Frengs links environmental damage, such as nuclear testing and nickel mining, to the resulting long-term harm to the human body. Frengs applies this kind of analysis to Claudine Jacque's texts, urging the reader to consider issues of ecological violence and environmental injustices alongside the social injustices that continue to be central threats in Oceania.

Chapters 4 and 5 address essential aspects of postcolonial francophone literature: the school system, the choice of language, and the silencing of postcolonial bodies. In chapter 4, "Writing Institutionalized Bodies: Breaking out of Confinement," the author, using Foucauldian theory from *Discipline and Punish*, explores the topic of subjected bodies and the confining spaces of colonial institutions. She highlights criticisms of the colonial school system in female-authored Oceanian narratives as evidence that these writers are appropriating confined spaces. Frengs insists on the value of intertextual dialogues found in the narratives and argues that these dialogues are the "emergence" of a new Francophone literature that breaks boundaries and reaches out to a wider audience, rejecting symbolic "confinement." Chapter 5, "To Speak or Not to Speak," demonstrates that these female authors emerge out of confinement by breaking their silence, a symbolic yet essential element of their condition. The author concludes that the narratives of these authors, by breaking with the patriarchal, phallogocentric canon, give voice to the silenced.

In summary, Frengs offers a solid scholarly text that employs feminist, ecocritical, and literary theory and contains a wealth of evidence. It brings a number of valuable additions to the field, representing an exceptionally important scholarly source and essential reading for scholars of Francophone Women's Literature from French Polynesia and New Caledonia.

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